

William P. Robinson House (Elwell House)  
3742 Erie Street  
Willoughby  
Lake County  
Ohio

HABS No. OH-2120

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

WILLIAM P. ROBINSON HOUSE  
(ALSO KNOWN AS THE ELWELL HOUSE)

Location: 3742 Erie Street, Willoughby, Lake County, Ohio.

Present Owner: Mr. and Mrs. Paul B. Roesch, River Road, Gates Mills, Ohio.

Present Occupant: Several temporary tenants.

Present Use: Multiple dwelling.

Statement of Significance: This house, designed by one of Western Reserve's leading builders and architects, Jonathan Goldsmith, is a fine representative of the type of formal house that the early 19th-century settlers in that area built for themselves after they had achieved a fair degree of financial prosperity. It is typical of its period and location and illustrates the conservative, refined taste of settlers there from New England in the Federal period.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: Aaron Olmstead obtained title to the land from the Connecticut Land Company by various quitclaim deeds. David Abbott obtained title from the heirs of Aaron Olmstead in 1809. Jacob Wert obtained title from David Abbott in 1811. Samuel and Noah Wert obtained title from Jacob Wert. Samuel quitclaimed to Noah. A Warranty Deed (in Cuyahoga Volume H, page 281, dated May 10, 1827, Noah Wert and Fanny, wife) deeded to William Peck Robinson. The taxes that year suddenly increased. William P. Robinson built a house therefore c. 1827. In March of 1837, Carolyn B. Robinson, the wife of William P. Robinson, leased to George W. Davison for \$150 per year for five years. The 1840 tax duplicate for Lake County discloses that this particular property (and more land) is listed in the name of the heirs of William P. Robinson. The Lake County Common Pleas Court Execution Docket C, page 129, and Chancellery Record G, page 339, in 1848 indicate that Carolyn, the wife of the deceased William P. Robinson, is now Carolyn R. Buell. (In 1846 the widow Carolyn married the Hon. Jonathan Buell of East Bloomfield, Trumbull County, at Rochester, N.Y.) Judge Buell and his wife lived in the William P. Robinson House

in 1857, as seen on an 1857 map of Lake County. On May 26, 1856, the heirs of William P. Robinson deeded these lands to Carolyn R. Buell. In 1862 Rozella Stewart acquired the property. From this point on, documentation is not possible. The Elwell family, however, lived in the house c. 1900.

2. Date of erection: About 1827, or at least before 1830. (Deed in Cuyahoga Volume H, page 281).
  3. Architect: Jonathan Goldsmith (1783-1847). Goldsmith, who introduced the neoclassic style into Ohio in the 1820's, came to the state from New Haven, Connecticut. Originally a shoemaker and carpenter, he developed into an architect and draftsman of considerable skill. The Bank of Geauga (later the Painesville National Bank), which stood until 1925, was another of his works.
  4. Original plans: None known.
  5. Alterations and additions: The exterior appearance of the house is essentially unaltered. A small, one-story utility wing was added to the back of the south wing (kitchen wing) sometime in the 19th century, and a modern two-story porch has been recently added to the back of the main wing for apartment dwelling purposes. The chimneys are not original, and the roof has been recovered. In the late 19th century the original 12-pane sashes had been replaced with solid sheets of glass. The present owners, in an attempt to restore the house, replaced these Victorian windows with 6-light sashes, not realizing their mistake. There are two of the original 12-light windows in the back of the main wing. The interior has been recently cut up with temporary partitions for multiple dwelling purposes. For the most part, these additions have not damaged any of the important interior construction or ornamentation and could be easily removed.
  6. Important old views and references: None known at this time.
- B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: None known.
- C. Sources of Information:
1. Primary:  
  
Deeds, Office of the Recorder of Deeds for Lake County,  
Painesville, Ohio.  
  
Deeds, Office of the Recorder of Deeds for Geauga County,  
Chardon, Ohio.

2. Secondary:

Frary, I. T. Early Homes of Ohio. Richmond, Virginia:  
Garrett & Massie, Inc., 1936.

Hitchcock, Mrs. Peter, "The Homestead," Mentor, Ohio.  
Mrs. Hitchcock has finished work on an unpublished  
monograph on the architect-builder Jonathan Goldsmith.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Robinson House has a two-story side-hall pedimented central block with one-story side wings that are set back and project beyond the main block's rear elevation. This is a standard plan that Goldsmith frequently used for domestic structures; it is also typical of many medium-sized Greek Revival houses in this area of Ohio. The Robinson House has elements that are characteristic of both the Federal Period in New England and the Greek Revival in general. Notable features include the detailing of the main entry with its elongated Ionic columns and the barrel-vaulted ceilings of the symmetrical side porches.
2. Condition of fabric: Fairly good. Some restoration has been attempted. The house appears to be structurally sound.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: two-story main block - 27'2" x 38'11"  
one-story flanking wings - 20'5" x 22'10"  
height of main block - approx. 28' to  
gable ridge  
height of wings - approx. 19' to  
gable ridge
2. Foundations: Sandstone ashlar (in good condition).
3. Wall construction: Heavy oak frame with clapboarding on the sides of the main block and on the flanking wings: flush horizontal wooden siding on the front of the main block and lining the recessed porches of each flanking wing. The front of the main block is divided into three bays, separated by fluted, finely carved, wooden Ionic pilasters which support a fairly light neoclassic pediment. On the front of each flanking wing are identical porches, each of which has four fluted Ionic columns, barrel vault plaster ceilings, and modern wrought-iron railings. The front corners of the

flanking wings have narrow fluted pilasters, and their gable ends are treated as neoclassic pediments. The back gable of the main block is simply treated and does not have a pediment.

4. Chimneys: Modern brick.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The front entrance and its framing are of considerable architectural interest and importance. It is perhaps Goldsmith's finest work and was probably carved by Goldsmith himself. It is almost identical to the doorway from the Gillett house of Painesville, Ohio, which is now preserved in The Cleveland Museum of Art. Four slender Ionic columns (the two side ones engaged) support acanthus-carved consoles which are in turn surmounted by a carved lintel of neoclassic rosettes and swags (all in pine). There are flanking sidelights which, unlike most Goldsmith doorways, have wooden mullions instead of lead. All of the doors are recessed with paneled jambs. The doors - of the heavy, painted, six-paneled type - are original. There is a back entrance.

b. Windows: Originally 12/12 double-hung wooden sash; simple neoclassic frames surrounded by a heavy bead. The pediment of the facade has a ten-light fanlight.

6. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: The main block has a gable roof with the ridge perpendicular to the front elevation; the flanking wings also have gable roofs; however, the ridges are perpendicular to the side elevations of the main block.

b. Framing: Wooden rafters supported at midpoint by strut-supported purlins.

c. Cornice, eaves: Neoclassic pediments on the facade of the main block and ends of the flanking wings; a cornice with scroll modillions on three sides of the main block (there is no cornice on the rear elevation); a similar cornice with scroll modillions on the fronts and pedimented ends of the flanking wings.

d. Dormers: None.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: Side hall plan with side wings.

2. Stairways: The main staircase is original and well preserved. It rises in a single run along the outside (right-hand) wall of the hall and has a round walnut handrail on thin, straight, square-in-plan painted banisters. The rail ends in a curl at the bottom with a central round post surrounded by the same thin banisters. There is a frieze running around the staircase opening and down the side of the staircase which contains flatly-carved leaf-scrolls and blossoms in relief.
3. Flooring: Medium-width floorboards, many of which still have the original light-brown paint. Boards fastened with wrought nails.
4. Wall finishes: The walls are plastered. The front hall bedchamber on the second floor still retains its original stenciled walls. This is supposedly the work of Moses Eaton, an itinerant artist from New York State who probably worked in this area in the 1830's. (There is similar stenciling in The New York State House by Eaton.) The 27 stars above the eagles in the stenciling in the Robinson House indicate that this may have been done in the 1830's at the time of the admission of Michigan to the Union. The original blue-green color has been restored to the walls of the parlor in the north wing, and traces of a black-and-gold Empire wallpaper were found directly on the plaster walls of the dining room. (The design was of seeds and pods.)
5. Doorways and doors: Simple six-panel doors; the panels are recessed and a molding separates them from the stiles and rails.
6. Hardware: In general, modern; however, some original thumb latches remain.
7. Lighting: Modern electric fixtures.
8. Heating: Original fireplaces remain; however, steam radiators have been installed.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: In 1840 Lucia Robinson wrote of "The Robinson home, first after crossing Chagrin River on west side, top of hill." It is set back about 50 feet from the road; the facade faces eastward.
2. Enclosures: None.

3. Outbuildings: None.
4. Walks: Modern brick walks.

Prepared by Jairus B. Barnes  
Museum Curator  
Western Reserve Historical Society  
Cleveland, Ohio  
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#### PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared as a cooperative project between the Western Reserve Historical Society and the Historic American Buildings Survey following a recommendation in 1964 by Mr. Robert C. Gaede, then the National Chairman of the American Institute of Architects' Committee for the Preservation of Historic Buildings. In February 1965, a final list of fourteen structures to be recorded was agreed upon by the Western Reserve Historical Society, Mr. Meredith B. Colket, Director; and the HABS, acting upon the recommendations of John C. Poppeliers, Editor. The Cleveland Chapter AIA assisted in the evaluation of these structures. A documentary research program which included both historical and architectural write-ups was coordinated with Mr. Jack Large, Assistant to the Director of the Western Reserve Historical Society. It was undertaken by members of the Society and local architects. Mr. Martin Linsey of Shaker Heights, Ohio, supplied the photographs.